PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN SELECTED WATERSHED PROJECTS IN GEORGIA AND ALABAMA

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Abstract. As part of an internship sponsored by the EPA and the Society for Applied Anthropology, selected watershed projects in Georgia and Alabama with some level of EPA involvement and using some form of the "watershed approach" were examined. The ultimate aim of this project was to provide information and guidance on participation issues for those developing and implementing watershed projects. Another important goal was to examine if and how stakeholder identification and outreach is being extended to minority and low-income (environmental justice) communities in watershed projects, with the ultimate goal being to identify obstacles to identification of and outreach to these groups and then to develop strategies to overcome these obstacles.

INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

In recent years, the EPA has been promoting alternatives to "top-down" regulatory approaches to natural resource management. These "bottom-up" alternatives (or "top-down" approaches with broader participation) include Community-Based Environmental Protection (CBEP), which involves the development of locally-focused and -generated strategies to supplement EPA's existing programs. While there is great diversity in CBEP projects, guiding principles of the approach include: 1. a definable geographic area, 2. collaborative partnerships with "a full range of stakeholders," and 3. "consideration of a community's environmental, economic and social objectives in order to promote sustainability" or "a focus on environmental results" (EPA Region 4).

The Watershed Protection Approach (WPA) is one form of CBEP that the EPA has been promoting since 1991. Using hydrologic barriers to define the problem area, guiding principles of this approach include: 1. "a high level of stakeholder involvement," 2. problem identification, 3. management techniques based on data and "strong science," and 4. integrated solutions and management. Definitions of who should be involved vary and include "relevant" stakeholders, those most likely to be affected by management decisions, those most likely to be concerned, those interested in watershed management and project outcomes, or those "most able to take action."

There has also been a movement in the EPA toward greater inclusion of minority and low-income groups, or "environmental justice communities," in environmental issues. One question raised by this project is whether the broader message of environmental justice, beyond "toxics and race" is getting out beyond federal and state agencies to those leading and participating in natural resource management projects. In addition to examining the participation goals stated above, I believe it is important to examine if and how environmental justice concerns (under any name) are being addressed "on the ground" in watershed projects and what kinds of guidance and resources may be needed to better address these concerns.

PROJECT GOALS

This project is an examination of how five EPA Region 4 watershed projects using some form of the WPA are handling participation issues. These participation issues are diverse and include the composition of steering committees, who is responsible for stakeholder identification and outreach, how stakeholder identification and outreach methods are selected, and whether and how environmental justice communities are identified and targeted for outreach. While diverse topics are covered in the case studies (available elsewhere), the primary focus of this analysis will be stakeholder identification and outreach to minority and low-income watershed groups.

These projects have formidable goals – to manage large land areas with large populations with relatively small amounts of resources. As such, I believe it is important to examine these projects in detail, particularly in regard to whether and how these projects are meeting the goals of CBEP. In examining watershed project participation issues, specific questions one might ask include: How are "stakeholders" and "the public" being defined and identified? Is it important to include environmental justice communities in these projects? What might be obstacles to including "stakeholders," "the public," and environmental justice communities in these projects? This examination is also critical to the improvement of current and future watershed projects as CBEP.

One of the primary goals of this project is to allow current and future watershed projects to benefit from the lessons learned from these earlier projects. Some of the project participants interviewed stressed that when their projects began, the WPA was new and there was little guidance available on outreach issues – one interviewee noted that "we had to make it up as we went along." Sharing information and building on accumulated knowledge are clearly important to the continuance and improvement of the WPA. This project is also intended to provide specific guidance and information for watershed projects on participation issues involving minority and low-income groups, as several interviewees expressed the need for more specific ideas and resources than are currently available. Toward this end, I am developing an Outreach Resource Guide in consultation with individuals experienced in stakeholder identification and outreach to minority and low-income groups in a variety of contexts.

PROJECT METHODS

For this project, five watershed projects were selected from EPA Region 4, focusing particularly on the states of Georgia and Alabama. Projects selected utilized some form of the WPA and had some form of EPA support. Projects selected were: 1. the Savannah River Basin Project (on the Georgia/South Carolina border, including a portion of North Carolina), 2. the Flint Creek Watershed Project (north-central Alabama), 3. the Cahaba River Basin Project (central Alabama), 4. the Broad River Community Watershed Project (northeast Georgia), and 5. the Hiwassee River Watershed Project (southeastern Tennessee, northern Georgia, and western North Carolina).

After the projects were selected, initial contacts were made with EPA representatives for each project. Project directors and other participants involved in stakeholder identification and outreach for each project were then contacted. Attempts were made to include all the major players involved in stakeholder identification and outreach, and to provide balanced coverage, including agency representatives, community and environmental organizations, and other individuals, depending on the case. Simultaneously, background information on each project was collected and an interview protocol was developed. Structured interviews were conducted by telephone with a total of 24 people, ranging from four to six per case. A case study for each project was then constructed from these interviews. The appropriate interviewees then reviewed the case studies.

Interview contacts who indicated that they had experience with stakeholder identification and outreach, particularly to minority and low-income groups, were then consulted concerning the development of guidance on doing this kind of identification and outreach in a watershed project context. Other recommended contacts are now being consulted. This information will be incorporated into the Outreach Resource Guide discussed above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Defining Stakeholders

Some of the primary questions asked by this project concern how the word "stakeholder" was defined for these watershed projects, who were identified as stakeholders, and how this affected project participation. This is especially important as the word "stakeholder" has come to replace "the public" in public policy participation efforts (Creighton, 1995), including natural resource management. Despite the widespread use of the term "stakeholder" in environmental management, there have been few attempts to examine how this terminology may impact participation "on the ground," in the implementation of these projects.

It appears that the definition of the term "stakeholder" in the initial stages of these watershed projects (or in the absence of a definition, the assumptions shared by project participants of who stakeholders were) was critical in determining who was targeted and ultimately involved in these projects (although the door was frequently left open for "those who express interest"). In addition, these groups of

identified stakeholders were usually prioritized at some stage of the project, as some groups' involvement was seen as more critical than others (given limited resources), such as the involvement of landowners with riverfront property or representatives of local government.

For these projects, stakeholders were generally defined as "anyone in the watershed," "those impacting or being impacted by water quality issues," "those expressing an interest" in watershed issues, and those "with the ability to act." Focusing on those that identify themselves, express interest, and are able to act does allow projects to maximize available resources, but may have implications for watershed groups that one project participant described as "falling below the horizon" of agencies and project leaders, as well as those who are unable to act due to "cultural differences," a lack of political power or institutional factors. One project interviewee noted that they were primarily targeting those with "the power to influence natural resource management, and minority and low-income groups have little to offer in this regard." The question raised by this statement is whether it is enough that the "powers that be" and some additional "stakeholders" develop better ways to communicate and address water quality issues through these projects. Even where "anyone in the watershed" is considered a stakeholder, there may be obstacles to involvement. Is there a need or obligation for these projects to seek out traditionally excluded or under-represented groups?

A few interviewees felt that there is a need "to have information upfront" for project directors on the differential costs and benefits of water quality issues by "ethnic group" or socioeconomic class, and that once this differential impact is established, watershed projects can then begin to take these issues into consideration. Others expressed the view that no proof of differential impact was necessary, as these groups should be included if resources allow. While several project participants felt that it was not practical in terms of resources to target these groups, most felt that some inclusion was appropriate, with subsistence fishing mentioned as a primary reason in more than one case. A few individuals expressed the view that differentiation of these groups for identification and outreach purposes may in itself be discriminatory, as "they are all human beings," and outreach should be "put out there for everyone." Other individuals felt that some accommodation is necessary to compensate for political, cultural, and institutional barriers.

Identifying Obstacles

In addition to these more general issues of participation, interviewees were asked to identify obstacles to the identification of and outreach to minority and low-income watershed groups, as well as the general public. Some individuals felt that the scale of watershed projects inherently creates barriers to "looking at the smaller units and the human interactions." These interviewees stated that their focus was "larger ecological issues" and their impact on society as a whole, rather than "how larger ecological issues are filtered down to social groups."

Another identified obstacle to identification and outreach was the communication gap that exists between the larger natural resource agencies (such as EPA and the Tennessee Valley Authority) and the public. As such, local institutions, which were described as being more "in touch" with local people, had to mediate between the two to close this gap. On another project, one interviewee felt that some agency representatives had already extended their "comfort levels" to some extent, and that there was an implicit fear of "losing even more power to citizens." This participant felt that case studies might be important here "in forming the process and seeing the kinds of results achieved by other projects," and in the process increasing the comfort levels of the agencies involved with the idea of broader participation.

Several interviewees stressed that the methods of outreach used in watershed projects might be inappropriate for certain groups, especially the use of written materials "in communities that emphasize the oral tradition." Several participants also noted that literacy rates in some areas need to be taken into account, as well as appealing to issues of concern to a wide range of people (although "outsiders" might not be able to guess at what these communities' concerns might be). Some interviewees noted that community members may not have the resources to be involved, or may find the meeting locations and times to be obstacles to participation. Others felt that members of minority and low-income groups were unlikely to attend meetings or workshops of any kind, and as a result, projects need to "go out to creek banks and church groups," as well as door-to-door, to reach members of these communities.

In considering alternative strategies for reaching minority and low-income groups and other members of the general public, several project participants felt that the need to use resources efficiently and the lack of readily-identifiable groups in these communities were serious barriers to involving these groups in watershed

projects. As such, a lack of resources (in the form of "money, time and people") was seen as being a major obstacle to identification and outreach, and "pragmatic decisions" had to be made to use available resources as efficiently and effectively as possible. This frequently resulted in the targeting of certain priority groups of stakeholders and "falling back" on more general strategies in hopes of reaching some members of minority and low-income groups. One goal in developing the Outreach Resource Guide is to provide some more efficient and "doable" ways of reaching these groups given limited resources.

Another frequently-mentioned barrier was apathy on the part of these groups, as well as the general public, especially concerning environmental issues. Several noted that without a crisis, "people won't understand the need to protect watersheds." Another common statement was that it was likely that minority and low-income groups would have other priorities besides watershed protection. While most participants interviewed speculated as to what these higher priorities might be for the communities in question (which can be problematic), one interviewee noted that in one community in which he had worked, a strong focus on improving education, while justified, diverted people's energy away from water quality and other environmental issues.

Another major obstacle noted was the top-down approach used by some projects in identifying watershed problems and developing solutions, rather than bottom-up approaches. Several individuals felt that there is a need for local groups to identify problems, with agencies then providing support to solve these problems. Several interviewees felt that there is also a need to tap into the knowledge of community members, as "the people living [in the watershed] have a much better grasp of what's going on." More than one interviewee noted that project participants (even those who were watershed residents) had learned a great deal from community members.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This project and its results highlight the need to look at the terms currently in use, such as "stakeholder," and examine how these terms may shape participation in the implementation of these projects. In addition, it is important to look at how projects labeled as CBEP or WPA are putting into practice the more abstract principles on which they are based. Simultaneously, it is critical to look at social and institutional factors and how they affect participation "on the ground."

It is also extremely important to take a closer look at how environmental justice concerns are or aren't being addressed in natural resource management projects. This raises an important question: Is the message getting out beyond the EPA and other federal and state agencies that environmental justice issues cover more than toxics and race issues? Based on most of the responses I received from interviewees (asking what environmental justice had to do with watershed projects), the answer in this case would be no. However, despite this response to the term "environmental justice," many of those interviewed were discussing project issues that would be considered "environmental justice" issues.

Another important question is: Are specific guidelines and resources available to help projects such as these address environmental justice concerns in project implementation? Based on interviewees' responses, the answer to this question would also be negative. The need was expressed throughout the project for more specific guidance and resources to deal with the obstacles outlined above. The overall message received was that most project directors and participants wanted to include these groups and felt it was appropriate that they be involved, but projects lacked the resources and guidance to do so. Hopefully, the Outreach Resource Guide I am preparing will begin to address these needs.

LITERATURE CITED

Creighton, James L., 1995. Trends in the Field of Public Participation in the United States. *Interact: The Journal of Public Participation* 1,1:7-23.